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ABSTRACT

The home mission of the University English department is the teaching of reading and writing, and its foreign mission is the "converting" to a higher literacy of those outside the English department, especially those who teach English in the high schools and other subjects at the college level. Potential high school English teachers' training in writing must be extensive, and should begin with Freshman composition courses, which should be small in size to allow teachers more time to work with students on their writing problems and to conduct research. Sophomore English courses, which often demand little writing, should be revised to go beyond literary texts and convey the importance of writing skills. As for "converting" members of other academic departments to a higher literacy, programs such as the National Writing Project, in which teachers from all educational levels work together to define and resolve problems across the compositional spectrum are proving to be very valuable. Another successful program is the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's faculty writing workshop, which encourages teachers from all campus disciplines to incorporate writing in their assignments. When the university English department completes its home mission properly by engaging fellow departments, it will also accomplish its foreign mission. (HTH)

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THE FOREIGN MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Arthur M. Eastman

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The Foreign Mission of the University English Department

In ecclesiastical matters, the home mission is the business of the church within the country; foreign mission, its business outside the country's boundaries. Converting the heathen Chinese was foreign mission, rescuing the derelicts on skid row was home mission.

The home mission of an English department in a major university is what it does in its classrooms. It teaches reading and writing. In the big state universities fifty-five to sixty percent of its energies go to tending the linguistically immature in freshman composition. Another fifteen to twenty or even twenty-five percent go to sharpening the perceptions of sophomore lit. students.

(Parenthesis: I like the mission analogy. It invites such questions as what one must do to be linguistically saved, how humble one must be to enter the kingdom of literacy, and what forgiveness is possible for those who have whored after science fiction and worshipped the false gods of television. But let me moderate my language and end my digression.)

The home mission is the teaching of reading and writing. The foreign mission is the converting to literacy or to a higher literacy those outside the classrooms of the ~~University~~ English ~~Department~~. This includes a great many, to be sure, but I am here concerned with two particular populations: the teachers of high school English, and university teachers in disciplines other than English--the teachers of chemistry, sociology, physics, psychology, and ~~the~~ the rest. Let me speak first of the teachers of high school English, whom we and the schools of education prepare. Our achievement here is minimal. The teachers we've prepared are ~~there~~ in the schools, public and private, and they are, presumably, keeping their students out of the neighborhood pool halls; but their success with the illiterate and subliterary, all reports indicate, is, less than it should be.

The reasons are many and the wearier for being often mentioned--the saturation by television of youth's free hours, the distrust of tradition and authority stemming from the 60's, the lickspittle haste with which English departments tried to maintain their weakening hold on student allegiance by abandoning prerequisites, fragmenting their offerings, and introducing spates of jazzy (or do I mean punk rock) electives.

Whatever the reasons, though, it is up to English Departments to perform their home mission aright so that those who go abroad ^{as teachers} are properly trained and properly committed to the task they undertake.

Consider their training in writing. It must be serious, continued, extensive. Like the French school boy of marvelous memory they must write until writing is second nature whether its business is to record notes, pen letters, rough out an essay, polish an article. They must master the attitudes and devices that further invention; they must adapt themselves all but automatically in their words and images, their tones and arguments to the audiences they address. They must come to know that, form following function, the arrangement of writing is a means to the end of some kind of change in the reader's mind. In the process of attaining these masteries, the students who are the secondary teachers to be must write and write and write. They must draft and redraft, polish and polish again.

My language may suggest that I regard the primary training in English composition as training in a skill. Perhaps, but skills and that to which they are applied exist in symbiosis. To write well is to discover, as the titles of various texts remind us, and the discovery is beneficently dual. One learns one's own mind which, even in the least of us and our students, is a treasury of idea, image, sentiment, belief, stereotype, myth, anecdote, parable, bias, role, and model. And one learns that about which one writes: the lesson in history, the connection among philosophical positions, the calculus of politics, the harmony of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" or Stevens's "Sunday Morning."

If these are platitudes, they derive from truths that some members of university English departments forget or suppress--sometimes from sloth, sometimes from self-interest. The teacher of freshman composition, which is where most of our training in writing takes place, is on the average younger than the department's average and is usually untenured. To make it through the gates to academic permanence, the tenure-tracked instructors or assistant professors must focus as much energy as can be wrested from other activities on their own research and writing. Since the reading and correcting of papers and the concomitant conferences demand from most people much time, the temptation is to keep the number of writing assignments low, the length short, the conferences few.

What this means, of course, is that the university is the chief offender in debasing the education and training of those who, in the secondary schools, will be found wanting in their teaching of composition. And the English department is, at worst, in collusion with the university or, at best, the holder of guilty knowledge, the bearer of a troubled conscience.

There are several solutions to this dilemma. One is to reduce the size of the freshman sections so that they can be made rich and rigorous for the student but not too stupendously demanding on the instructor. Another is to build the teaching of composition more prominently into the University's reward pattern. Still others are to follow the Garrison method of one-on-one consultation, the Van Nostrand method of "functional writing," or the Middlman method of "weekly writings," which is a variation on the journal method.

The latter methods may be suited to individual instructors, and I hope that university department help their younger faculty become acquainted with them. Raising the value of teaching composition in promotion & tenure judgments is something that can only be done when the college and the University to which the English department belongs change their values--a point to which I will

return. But the reduction of the size of Freshman sections is, right now, within the reach of any department and university willing to venture the small discomfort of change for the great gain of improvement in the teaching of their own students and, through them, of high school students, many of whom as a consequence will be entering the university hereafter far better prepared than now.

Since my university is on the quarter system, let me make my point with reference to such a system, assuming that the same principles may be accommodated in a semester system. Our freshman English sections average 24; freshmen are generally required to take three quarters, writing in each quarter approximately 3000 words. That's not a great deal of writing; it's spread out across the entire year; the instruction inevitably ~~thins~~^{flows} out and the instructors, watching the conveyor belt of students rolling inexorably by, often fail~~ing~~^{ing} after a time, even to register names. What we can do is do our job better, much better, by reducing the freshman English requirement from three quarters to two, by reducing the section size by one-third (from 24 to 16) and by increasing each term the number of writing assignments or the amount of writing by one half. Such a change, (I would argue), would cost the department nothing but its pain. Students would respond to the fuller attention they received from their instructors, and their instructors would themselves respond more vigorously and more rigorously to the smaller classes, the smaller size of each individual batch of papers, their significantly increased familiarity with each student's powers and weaknesses.

Some of you may be irritated that I am focusing on freshman English as if on the frail shoulders of that overburdened course rested the department's entire home mission and that portion of its foreign mission concerned with the preparation of secondary teachers of English. Of course this is not the case. These missions are the business of every course within the department from the sophomore surveys, whether taught in huge lectures or in smaller but never under-populated individual sections, to the petite seminars for seniors. But the fact is, at many a university,

that the sophomore English courses, those that accommodate the humanities requirements of the engineering and business students, too often demand in the way of papers none or few. By their ^{almost exclusive} attention to the literary texts rather than to the students' writing, they communicate ~~the lesson~~ the lesson that writing isn't terribly important. Once again, perhaps, the chief offenders are the younger, tenure-tracked staff--and for the reasons indicated beforeⁱ the need to salvage for themselves time for research and (oh irony!) ^{or} writing.

If the University English Department fails or falters in its home mission, what allies has it in its concern for student literacy? The answer, of course, is few. An individual here, another there. Meanwhile the essay exam withers on the academic vine. Student writing is reduced to filling in blanks, darkening (with number two pencils) the circles or squares on op-scan sheets. That writing is a tool for learning, a developing skill for developing subject mastery, that it is the instrument of our apprehending the world without and giving it new texture, new form--these truths, like seed sown on barren soil, fail to fructify.

The general indictment in which I am indulging may be put this way, that University English departments, by failing in their home mission, fail in their foreign mission, whether that foreign mission be seen as the other segments of their own university or beyond, the realms of secondary teaching and elementary teaching. Perhaps the point is better made with a figure like that with which the Ptolemaic astronomers imaged the universe: the earth at the center, the moon, sun, and planets each in its appropriate sphere, then the fixed stars, and ultimately the primum mobile. In our figure the university English department's freshman composition course would be at the center, the sophomore literature courses next to it. Farther out would be the other departments of the college, then the other colleges, then the high schools, the elementary schools, the rest of society. And as the center fails, so the others.

Enough of gloom. What can we do, the better to do, what we should do? I've spoken briefly of some small improvements possible in freshman composition. But more, much more can be hoped for as a consequence of the revolution now well under way across the country--I refer to the explosion of interest in rhetoric. I refer to the view, now clichéd, that writing should be regarded as a process rather than a product. I refer to the growing emphasis on pre-writing, on the protocols of writing, on strategies of invention. I mean the growing transformation of emphasis in freshman composition from the final polished paper to the series of drafts and choices by which the final product of thought and writing is developed. On my own campus it is too much yet to say that freshman English is so different from what it was that alumni can't recognize it, but there's greater interest now than before in almost every aspect of the writing process and the teaching process, and that has manifested itself in important, externally recognizable ways.

One is the Southwest Virginia Writing Project, our version of the Virginia Writing Project, which is Virginia's version of the Bay Area Writing Project--and in this project University, four-year college, community college, and high school teachers work together to define and resolve problems all across the compositional spectrum, themselves writing the assignments they plan for their students, making of themselves local experts prepared to counsel each other in the years ahead. What's primarily involved in this endeavor is the committed cooperation of teachers of English from all provinces, all precincts.

The other way is the Faculty Writing Workshop, instituted two years ago and participating in a loosely strung network with comparable workshops at other universities in the commonwealth. What's involved in this endeavor is the committed cooperation of teachers from all across the campus in learning how to use writing in their assignments so that their students, whatever their disciplines, learn more. The project, hitherto ^{supported} ~~financed~~ by the Governor's Fund for Excellence,

provides four faculty from the English Department as teachers or directors; 18 faculty from the various departments are the students, each earning a comfortable and tax-free stipend. For five days a week for five weeks ^{in the summer} they work hard, on compositional theory, on the use thereof in their own teaching, and on their own writing. We would have them be better writers the better to value writing, the better to teach it, the better to recognize the best.

The Faculty Writing Workshop is, as you recognize, subversive. It communicates the notion that writing is every department's business, which is no news at all to the best liberal arts colleges and the finest of our universities but news indeed, even heresy, to many portions of our great state and municipal universities. Happily, the subversion is proceeding nicely. The handout on chemistry notebooks and reports at Virginia Tech now contains such language as this: "With the final report in mind, you might consider your laboratory work as involving pre-writing, a rough draft, a final draft, and a rhetorical (i.e., persuasive) commentary." That's marvelous, isn't it? Here's another passage from that same handout: "A good scientific report which goes unread is useless. Part of the task of the technical writer is to inform his audience of just what has been done and why it is of current interest. In other words, a good report must persuade one to read it." Graduate Teaching Assistants in our Department of Mechanical Engineering now spend part of their training time on "Reading, Evaluating and Grading Reports." At a faculty seminar in the Agronomy Department, two graduates of the Workshop addressed their colleagues on "Scientific Writing Efficiency," "The Writing Process," and "Organization."

These eminently successful projects promise better things to come, even if funds diminish. Let me explain. In recent years on our campus a highly visible, thoroughly lofty committee has been charged, as have comparable committees on other campuses, with the ^{task} ~~obligation~~ of developing a core program in liberal education for the entire university. Its report has been a long time coming, but

it has come. It recommends that all students take five sequences: one in freshman English, a second in mathematics, a third in the natural sciences, a fourth in the social ^{and} behavioral sciences, and a fifth in humanities and the arts.

The English Department is involved in this last sequence, of course, and will be re-examining and re-shaping its offerings to develop linked series of courses in which the later genuinely build on what has preceded them. It is more fully involved, however, with the first sequence, that in freshman English, in which it is being asked to do something that it once used to do, as those with long memories tell us.

Let me quote:

. . . students in this sequence do a substantial amount of reading, not only in textbooks and handbooks on the mechanics of writing and elements of style, but also in the works of skilled writers, in order to provide needed examples of truly effective use of the language. The committee feels quite strongly that this affords an excellent opportunity to put before the students some materials which are not only exemplary in the desired technical and stylistic sense, but also rich in intellectual content or literary value. That content and value need not be taught, as such. But in their reading the students could not escape some experience with and exposure to powerfully stated ideas and evocatively expressed human situations.

It is in this sense that the committee recommends the inclusion each year, on the required reading list for freshman English, of at least six carefully selected but diverse pieces (two each quarter) to be read by all students. These selections could vary over the years, and they certainly should not have to be considered the "best" or "most important" of their genres in any absolute sense. But the

committee sees substantial merit in providing this sort of common experience for the entire entering class of students each year.

That's the proposition: six works a year, each to be accorded one to two weeks--a total of one fifth to two fifths of the year's time. Much is admirable here--the attention to "materials which are not only exemplary in the desired technical and stylistic sense, but also rich in intellectual content or literary value"--but, as our freshman English committee brought home to the head of the new program, what is being proposed is the immediate past and the present all over again: freshman English to teach them how to write; freshman English to give them a shared acquaintance with work "rich in intellectual content or literary value." Freshman English ^{in short,} to make them literate.

Surely at this juncture, given our success with the Faculty Writing Workshop, with the missionary convictions the participants in that workshop now share, and the examples in writing assignments they provide their colleagues, given our growing expertise in writing and the teaching of writing at the various levels as well as in the different provinces--surely we are prepared first to propose and then to insist that all of these basic courses in the liberal arts require writing. And surely we are prepared to propose and insist that the reading of works rich in intellectual content be the business of each of the five sequences. The natural sciences can offer ^{Darwin or} Kuhn or Louis Thomas or Stephen J. Gould. The ~~social~~ ~~sciences~~ might have some Plato or Machiavelli, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, or Robert Coles. In the Humanities and the Arts are riches too great even to particularize. And Math has had its expositors in ^{letters} ~~numbers~~ no less than in figures, its thinkers to whom we listen because they talk a language rich in intellectual content and no less literate than numerate.

Like stout Cortez, one looks from the mountain top in southwestern Virginia and, with a wild surmise and no silence at all, contemplates a future in which training in writing and reading has again become every department's business--if not with an absolute parity of commitment, at least with sufficient involvement so that professors of hydrostatics, professors of accounting, professors of forest pathology, calculus, geophysics expect their students to write, to learn by writing, to communicate by writing, to value writing. When the professors exhibit such an attitude, their students will adopt it--from precept, from example, from the repeated and direct experience of writing. In an educational environment wherein those around them appreciate writing, the students in English who go out to become the teachers in the secondary schools will be reinforced in their commitment to our basic discipline. And the students in the other departments who go on to become teachers in secondary schools will similarly value writing. To return to ²metaphor[^] I used at the start of this paper, they too will have religion. Then the ~~University~~ English ~~Department~~, by having done its proper job, its home mission, better, by having engaged with its fellow departments in the university, may begin to feel that it is doing its foreign missions aright.

(And then, perhaps, the lion will lie down with the lamb.)

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